

2001HANOI02949 - CONFIDENTIAL

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ACTION EAP-00

INFO LOG-00 NP-00 ACO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 DS-00 EUR-00  
FBIE-00 VC-00 TEDE-00 INR-00 VCE-00 NSAE-00 SS-00  
SNIS-00 NISC-00 DSCL-00 DRL-02 NFAT-00 SAS-00 /002W  
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FM AMEMBASSY HANOI  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4643  
INFO ASEAN COLLECTIVE  
AMEMBASSY VATICAN  
USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HANOI 002949

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV AND DRL/RF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/09/2006  
TAGS: PHUM SOCI PREL VM REFFREE HUMANR ETMIN  
SUBJECT: CATHOLIC COMMUNITIES ALONG ROUTE ONE

11. (U) CLASSIFIED BY ROBERT C. PORTER, JR., CHARGE  
D'AFFAIRES, A.I., REASON: 1.5 (D)

12. (C) SUMMARY. EVIDENCE OF CATHOLIC LIFE ALONG ROUTE  
ONE BETWEEN HO CHI MINH CITY AND HANOI IS ABUNDANT IN  
MANY SOUTHERN AND CENTRAL LOCATIONS BUT TENDS TO  
DIMINISH FARTHER NORTH. BISHOPS AND PRIESTS REPORT  
OFTEN THRIVING CONGREGATIONS BUT LAMENT INSUFFICIENT  
NUMBERS OF PRIESTS. UNOFFICIALLY-RECOGNIZED NUNS IN  
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DANANG RUN A CENTER FOR HANDICAPPED CHILDREN AND A PRE-  
SCHOOL PROGRAM, FINANCED IN PART BY EXPORTS OF  
HANDICRAFTS. SOME CATHOLIC LEADERS INDICATED THAT  
FATHER NGUYEN VAN LY HAD BEEN ASKING FOR TROUBLE IN THE  
RUN-UP TO HIS ARREST AND LENGTHY SENTENCE, BUT  
EXPRESSED REGRET THAT GVN AUTHORITIES WOULD NOT PERMIT  
PRISON VISITS BY CATHOLIC CLERGY. END SUMMARY.

13. (U) DURING OCTOBER 25-NOVEMBER 2 TRAVEL BY EMBASSY  
VEHICLE BETWEEN HO CHI MINH CITY AND HANOI (SEPTELS  
FOCUS ON DISCUSSIONS WITH PROVINCIAL OFFICIALS), POL/C  
AND POL FSN MADE NUMEROUS IMPROMPTU VISITS TO CATHOLIC  
CHURCHES ALONG THE ROADSIDE, AS WELL AS STOPS AT SOME  
PROTESTANT CHURCHES AND BUDDHIST TEMPLES. PRIESTS AND  
BISHOPS SEEMED HAPPY TO SIT DOWN AND DISCUSS LOCAL  
CONDITIONS; WHEN CLERICS WERE NOT PRESENT, POL/C  
TALKED WITH PARISHIONERS ABOUT PARISH ACTIVITIES AND  
CONCERNs.

BIEN HOA: CATHOLIC CENTRAL  
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14. (U) BIEN HOA PROVINCIAL CAPITAL DONG NAI IS ABOUT  
45 KILOMETERS NORTH OF HO CHI MINH CITY ALONG ROUTE ONE  
AND HOME TO MANY OF THE CATHOLIC REFUGEES WHO LEFT THE  
NORTH IN 1954. FOR MILES ALONG THE HIGHWAY, CATHOLIC  
CHURCHES LINE THE HIGHWAY EVERY COUPLE HUNDRED FEET.  
MANY OF THESE OFTEN LARGE AND STUNNING CHURCHES WERE  
REBUILT IN THE 1990S WHEN IT BECAME EASIER FOR FAMILIES  
AND FRIENDS OVERSEAS TO SEND MONEY TOWARD THE  
REPLACEMENT AND/OR EXPANSION OF EARLIER CHURCH  
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BUILDINGS. MANY IF NOT MOST OF THESE PARISHES REMAIN  
BASED ON ORIGINAL PARISH MEMBERSHIP IN THE NORTH AND  
RETAIN SOME LINKS WITH THEIR ORIGINAL PARISH.

15. (SBU) TAN TINH PARISH, FOR EXAMPLE, NOW BOASTS A  
STUNNING TWO YEAR OLD HEXAGONAL CHURCH, REPORTEDLY  
BUILT AT A COST OF USD 500,000 AND CAPABLE OF SEATING  
OVER 1,000 PEOPLE. AT LEAST 200 PEOPLE ATTEND THE  
DAILY 5 A.M. MASSES, ACCORDING TO PARISHIONERS. ONLY  
ONE PRIEST SERVES THIS ACTIVE PARISH, HOWEVER. SAI  
QUAT PARISH, WHOSE 4,000 MEMBERS COME MOSTLY FROM THAI  
BINH PROVINCE, ALSO HAVE ABOUT 200 PEOPLE FOR EARLY  
MORNING DAILY MASS AND AT LEAST 1,000 CHILDREN STUDYING  
CATECHISM. ITS PRIEST CLAIMED THAT BIBLES AND TEACHING  
MATERIALS WERE SUFFICIENT BUT THAT CLASSROOM SPACE WAS  
NOT. MONEY FROM OVERSEAS WAS ALSO RESPONSIBLE FOR ITS  
REBUILDING; THE PRIEST SAID THAT THE CHURCH WAS NOW  
ABLE TO OFFER SOME FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO THE ORIGINAL

PARISH IN THE NORTH.

16. (C) NEARBY THACH LAM PARISH STEMS FROM THE 1954 EXODUS FROM NAM BINH AND NOW HAS A SEATING CAPACITY FOR OVER 1,000 PEOPLE ON ITS ELABORATE GRANITE BENCHES (A LOCAL SPECIALTY). IT, TOO, HAS OVER "HUNDREDS" OF CATECHISM STUDENTS BUT ONLY ONE PRIEST. CARPENTERS WERE BUSY BUILDING ADDITIONAL WOODEN BENCHES FOR THE OVERFLOW CROWDS WHO MUST SIT OUTSIDE DURING THE MORE CROWDED SUNDAY MASSES. LAC HOA PARISHIONERS ARE MOSTLY NATIVES OF THAI BINH PROVINCE; THE FRENCH-SPEAKING PRIEST CLAIMED THAT ABOUT 1,000 OF ITS 5,000 MEMBERS TURN UP FOR EARLY MORNING MASS EVERY DAY. HE IS  
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ASSISTED BY A YOUNGER CURATE WHO, BOTH PRIESTS SAID, HAD NOT BEEN ALLOWED BY THE GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE ON RELIGION TO BECOME A PRIEST OFFICIALLY FOLLOWING SEMINARY. IT OFFERS CATECHISM CLASSES TO ABOUT 1,000 STUDENTS. NEW MEMBERS TEND TO BE ONLY THOSE WHO MARRY INTO CATHOLIC FAMILIES; THE PRIEST SAID THAT THERE WERE FEW EXAMPLES OF VIETNAMESE HAVING BEEN CONVERTED BY FRIENDS.

NORTHWARD

17. (C) THUAN DIEN PARISH LIES IN NINH THUAN PROVINCE NORTH OF PHAN THIET. IT HOSTS TWO CHURCHES WITH TOTAL MEMBERSHIP OF ABOUT 2,000 SERVED BY TWO PRIESTS. ABOUT 200 PEOPLE COME FOR MORNING MASSES, AND IT OFFERS BIBLE CLASSES TWICE A WEEK FOR CHILDREN UNDER 16. HO DIEN CHURCH, ALSO IN NINH THUAN PROVINCE, BOASTS A BEAUTIFUL 100-YEAR OLD CHURCH BUILDING THAT WAS RECENTLY RENOVATED. ONE OF ITS TWO PRIESTS BEMOANED THE FRUSTRATIONS THE PARISH HAD FACED IN OBTAINING PERMISSION FROM LOCAL AUTHORITIES FOR EVERY STEP OF THE RECONSTRUCTION. HE ALSO POINTED TO AN ADJACENT LARGE SCHOOL BUILDING AND EXPLAINED THAT IT HAD BEEN TAKEN OVER BY THE STATE IN 1975. CHURCH AUTHORITIES ARE STILL IN TOUCH WITH THE LAST FRENCH PRIEST WHO SERVED THIS PARISH, HE ADDED. ABOUT 400 CHILDREN ATTEND CATECHISM CLASSES BUT CLASSROOM SPACE IS A CONSTRAINT.

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18. (U) BEYOND DANANG, CHURCH BUILDINGS ARE NOTICEABLY FEWER ALONG ROUTE ONE. LOCAL AUTHORITIES CLAIMED IN SOME PLACES INCLUDING QUANG NAM AND QUANG TRI PROVINCES THAT U.S. BOMBING HAD DESTROYED EARLIER CHURCHES. THE CHURCH AT LA VANG IN QUANG TRI, WHERE UP TO 100,000 CATHOLICS GATHER EVERY THREE YEARS TO COMMEMORATE THE APPEARANCE OF THE VIRGIN MARY, IS ONE SUCH BOMBED OUT CHURCH. ANOTHER EDIFICE REMAINS IN RUINS ALONG THE RIVER IN DOWNTOWN DONG HAI, CAPITAL OF QUANG BINH PROVINCE, ALTHOUGH POL/C WAS UNABLE TO CONFIRM HOW IT WAS DESTROYED. NOT UNTIL PHAT DIEM DISTRICT IN NINH BINH PROVINCE (SEPTEL) IN THE NORTH DOES THERE APPEAR TO BE ANY MAJOR CONCENTRATION OF CATHOLIC CHURCHES AND COMMUNITIES.

DANANG

19. (SBU) OVER 80 CATHOLIC NUNS HAVE SINCE 1993 BEEN RUNNING A CENTER FOR OVER 100 HANDICAPPED YOUTH NEXT DOOR TO THE 75-YEAR OLD PINK CATHEDRAL IN DOWNTOWN DANANG. SEVERAL SISTERS EXPLAINED THAT THEIR ORDER ALSO OPERATES 46 "HOUSES" FOR HANDICAPPED CHILDREN, LEPERS, AND OTHER DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN NATIONWIDE, INCLUDING IN MINORITY AREAS OF BAN ME THUOT, KON TUM, AND GIA LAI. THEY ASSERTED THAT THE STATE RUNS NO SUCH SCHOOLS OR CENTERS ANYWHERE IN THE COUNTRY. THEY ALSO PROVIDE A CENTER FOR MORE THAN 600 PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN, MOSTLY FROM FAMILIES WITH TWO WORKING PARENTS. THEY RECEIVE NO ASSISTANCE FROM THE GOVERNMENT AND MAINTAIN THEMSELVES PRIMARILY BY CONTRIBUTIONS FROM OVERSEAS AND  
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SALES (MOSTLY EXPORT) OF EMBROIDERY.

10. (C) SEVERAL SISTERS ASSERTED THAT THE STATE DOES NOT RECOGNIZE THEIR RELIGIOUS STATUS OFFICIALLY. MANY HAD TAKEN THEIR VOWS BEFORE 1975; THEY CLAIMED THAT NO ONE HAS BEEN ALLOWED OFFICIALLY TO BECOME A NUN SINCE THEN. NEW SISTERS HAVE JOINED "SECRETLY" BUT THE CONVENT HAS PREFERRED NOT TO ASK FOR PERMISSION DUE TO THEIR CONVICTION THE STATE WOULD REFUSE. THE LOCAL COMMITTEE ON RELIGION APPEARS TO BE WELL AWARE OF THEIR EXISTENCE, HOWEVER. SISTERS DESCRIBED HOW THE COMMITTEE KEEPS A CLOSE EYE ON THEIR EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES AND HAS FORCED A CLEAR DEMARCACTION -- A FENCE, SEPARATE KITCHENS -- BETWEEN THE CENTER AND THE

CONVENT ITSELF. THEY NOTED THAT THEY WERE EXTREMELY CAREFUL NEVER TO DISCUSS RELIGION WITH THE CHILDREN OR TO UNDERTAKE ANY PROSELYTIZING.

BISHOPS SPEAK OUT

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¶11. (C) THE BISHOP OF DANANG DESCRIBED THE THREE MAJOR DIFFICULTIES FACING THE CHURCH TODAY AS SELECTION OF BISHOPS, ORDINATION OF PRIESTS, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRAINING. HE CLAIMED THAT THE SITUATION WAS AT LEAST "BETTER NOW" AND NOTED THE MORE THAN 1,000 STUDENTS TAKING CATECHISM AND BIBLE CLASSES AT HIS CATHEDRAL. ONE OF THE FIVE SUNDAY SERVICES IS EXPLICITLY DIRECTED AT YOUTH GROUPS.

¶12. (C) THE BISHOP OF THANH HOA, WHO JUST STEPPED  
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DOWN AS THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF BISHOPS, NOTED THAT THE INTEREST IN THE CHURCH WAS NOWADAYS LIMITED IN PARTICULAR DUE TO ONGOING PREOCCUPATION WITH ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND STATUS, AND BY SMALLER FAMILY SIZE. PARENTS ARE LESS WILLING TO HAVE AN ONLY SON ENTER THE PRIESTHOOD, HE SAID. HE INSISTED THAT RELATIONS WITH THE GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE ON RELIGION WERE "BETTER THAN BEFORE," AND CLAIMED THAT SRV OFFICIALS WERE NOW "LESS INVOLVED" IN CHURCH AFFAIRS. HE DESCRIBED ONGOING, ACTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH THE VATICAN, BOTH BY E-MAIL AND BY TELEPHONE, AND SAID THAT THE SRV IS AWARE OF SUCH LIAISON AND RAISES NO OBJECTION. HE HIMSELF HAS BEEN TO THE VATICAN ON NUMEROUS OCCASIONS, HE NOTED.

¶13. (C) THE BISHOP ADDED WITH PRIDE THAT EACH OF THE 401 CHURCHES IN HIS DIOCESE HAS ONE OR TWO PRIESTS, BUT NOTED THAT THIS NUMBER WAS CLEARLY INSUFFICIENT FOR THE SIZE OF THE MEMBERSHIP. ON SUNDAYS, HE ESTIMATED THAT 1500 PEOPLE WORSHIP AT THE CATHEDRAL, WITH ABOUT 100 PEOPLE AT THE DAILY MORNING MASS. HE SAID HE REGRETTED THAT CATHOLIC CHURCHES IN MINORITY AREAS OPERATED ENTIRELY IN VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE AND THAT THERE WERE, AS OF YET, NO PRIESTS FROM AN ETHNIC MINORITY.

FATHER LY

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¶14. (C) THE BISHOP OF DANANG SAID THAT, WHILE HE  
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REGRETTED THE LENGTHY SENTENCE ON FATHER NGUYEN VAN LY, FATHER LY'S ACTIVITIES HAD BEEN "NOT GOOD" AND THAT HE HAD INDEED BEEN MIXING POLITICS AND RELIGION IN WAYS AGAINST WHICH HE HAD BEEN WARNED. THE BISHOP OF THANH HOA CALLED FATHER LY'S CASE "COMPLICATED" AND SAID THAT HE BELIEVED THAT FATHER LY'S GREATEST "CRIME" HAD BEEN TO ADVOCATE A "MULTI-PARTY" SYSTEM. HE CLAIMED THAT FATHER LY HAD "PUSHED" TOO HARD AND HAD FAILED TO ACCEPT DISCIPLINE EITHER FROM THE CHURCH OR FROM THE STATE AND HAD CONTINUED TO ADVOCATE "PERSONAL" VIEWS.

¶15. (C) THE BISHOP OF THANH HOA NONETHELESS EXPRESSED A HOPE THAT FATHER LY WOULD DEMONSTRATE A "GOOD ATTITUDE" IN PRISON AND NOT HAVE TO SERVE THE ENTIRE SENTENCE. HE CONFIRMED, HOWEVER, THAT PRIESTS AND MINISTERS WERE BARRED FROM MAKING PRISON VISITS; FATHER LY WILL BE UNABLE TO MAKE A CONFESSION OR TAKE THE SACRAMENT WHILE HE IS IMPRISONED, HE NOTED. HE ADDED THAT THE CHURCH HAD NOT PRESSED FOR PRISON ACCESS TO CATHOLIC PRISONERS, NOTING THAT IN SOME CASES "THE STATE STILL DOES NOT REALLY UNDERSTAND RELIGION."

¶16. (C) COMMENT: CATHOLIC AND OTHER RELIGIOUS LIFE CONTINUES TO HAVE A NOTICEABLE AND OFTEN VIBRANT PRESENCE THROUGHOUT VIETNAM, ALTHOUGH ITS VISIBILITY AND DYNAMISM IS VARIABLE. THERE APPEARS TO BE A BROAD RECOGNITION BY CATHOLICS AND OTHERS THAT THE OFFICIAL ENVIRONMENT FOR RELIGIOUS LIFE HAS IMPROVED DRAMATICALLY OVER THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS AND THAT FEWER CONSTRAINTS NOW EXIST ON STATE-SANCTIONED SERVICES OR CONTACTS WITH RELIGIOUS ENTITIES ABROAD.

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